
“READING” NATIONAL IDENTITY IN PANAMA THROUGH RENATO, A FIRST GENERATION PANAMANIAN REGGAE EN ESPAÑOL ARTIST

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Reggae en español (reggae in Spanish) is a hybrid cultural and musical form that blends elements of Jamaican dancehall and reggae. Panama gave birth to reggae en español in the late 1970s in the urban West Indian barrios of Río Abajo and Parque Lefevre in the capital city of Panama. As a product of West Indian migration from the Anglophone Caribbean and Central America, Panamanian reggae in Spanish evinces racial, cultural, and linguistic hybridity resulting from on-going processes of transculturation. As a hybrid cultural discourse, reggae en español pulls from various geographic areas (Africa, Caribbean, Panama) and musical genres (Jamaican dancehall and reggae). It is a prime example of cultural identity and difference, which reflects the multiplicity of the African diaspora experience. The lyrics of first generation Panamanian reggaesero Leonardo “Renato” Aulder convey the effect of hybridity and transculturation and aid in the reinterpretation of Panamanian national identity.

While *reggaetón* booms in Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic, the only Latin American country in which there is a real tradition of reggae is Panama. It is there that the pioneers of *reggae en español* live, there that the most serious reggae radio stations are found, there that reggae is improvised on rickety buses, and there that Marcus Garvey found enlightenment on the canal. In short, Panama is the forgotten republic of reggae.

- Christoph Twickel, “Reggae in Panama: *Bien Tough*.”

Often confused with the commercialized genre, *reggaetón*, for its similar sound and origins, *reggae en español* (reggae in Spanish) is a hybrid cultural and musical form that blends

elements of Jamaican dancehall and reggae. Panama gave birth to *reggae en español* in the late 1970s in the urban West Indian *barrios* of Río Abajo and Parque Lefevre in the capital city of Panama. Needless to say, *reggae en español* is just as much a product of West Indian migration and the Anglophone Caribbean (Jamaica and Barbados) as it is of Central America. Panamanian reggae in Spanish evinces racial, cultural, and linguistic hybridity resulting from on-going processes of transculturation. As a hybrid cultural discourse and art form, *reggae en español* pulls from various geographic areas (Africa, Caribbean, Panama) and musical genres (Jamaican dancehall and reggae). It symbolizes Stuart Hall's notion of cultural identity and difference, which reflects the multiplicity of the African diaspora experience. As an expression of African diasporic hybridity and difference, *reggae en español* merits entry into any discussion on Latin American hip hop because, like *reggaetón*, it is an extension of hip hop culture.

The hip hop movement emerged in the U.S. in the 1970s and echoed the attitudes of an oppressed, marginalized urban youth culture that desired to voice their experiences of poverty, racism, and social injustice (Price 1). As Alim suggests, "Hip hop is used by practitioners to refer to a vast array of cultural practices including MCing (rappin), DJing (spinnin), writing (graffiti art), breakdancing (and other forms of streetdance), and cultural domains such as fashion, language, style, knowledge, and politics, all of which give us 'Hip Hop Culture'" (2). Since the 1970s, hip hop has evolved globally and "become a vehicle ... for reworking local identity all over the world" (Mitchell 1). In Latin America, artists appropriate hip hop culture to redefine nationality and a national sense of belonging, which often involves blacks and other subaltern populations historically excluded from the nation-state. The scholarship of Fernandes, Dennis, and Feracho attests to this phenomenon.¹ *Reggae en español* artists such as Leonardo "Renato" Aulder also help us (re)interpret Panamanian national identity from the perspective of urbanity. While *reggaetón* is both a product and reflection of the U.S. hip hop movement, as previously mentioned, *reggae en español* is primarily rooted in Jamaican dancehall and reggae. However, the hip hop music scene in New York City heavily influenced the style, attitude, and lyrics of pioneering Panamanian reggae in Spanish artists such as Edgardo Franco, known as El General. El General's circuitous trajectory from Panama to New York and back explains how the genre was simultaneously nurtured by Jamaican dancehall rhythms and reggae as well as the

burgeoning 1980s hip hop movement in the U.S. While in the States, El General recorded “Tu Pum Pum” (Your Pum Pum, 1990),² a dancehall song in Spanish performed to the beat box and baseline rhythms that characterized U.S. rap. The hit song enabled El General to continue recording tracks such as “Te Ves Buena” (You Look Good, 1991), “Muévelo” (Move it, 1991), “El Caramelo” (Caramel, 1992),³ “Las Chicas” (The Girls, 1995), and the “Robi-Rob’s Boriqua Anthem” (Robi-Rob’s Puerto Rican Anthem, 1994) (Twickel 82). In addition, in the 1980s and 1990s, El General toured and performed with the rap group, the Cold Cush Brothers, and the hip hop music sensation, C & C Music Factory.⁴

Reggae en español, therefore, is indeed linked to the hip hop movement. First generation *reggaesero* Renato’s musical production and personal narrative as a Panamanian raised in the U.S. Canal Zone also point to the U.S. (hip hop) influence on *reggae en español* as well as the general impact of transculturation on the genre’s trajectory and formation. In “*Mestizaje, Transculturation, Heterogeneity*,” cultural critic Antonio Cornejo Polar defined transculturation as “the construction of a syncretic plane that finally incorporates in a more or less unproblematical totality (in spite of the conflictive character of the process) two or more ethnic identities, two or more aesthetic codes and historical experiences” (117). Transculturation explicates *reggae en español*’s genesis and its inherent hybridity. As Rosaldo explains, “...hybridity can be understood as the ongoing condition of all human cultures, which contain no zones of purity because they undergo continuous processes of transculturation (two-way borrowing and lending of cultures)” (xv). As a musical art form typified by hybridity and transculturation, *reggae en español* borrows from a myriad of cultures to forge a unique genre in the Panamanian Isthmus. Furthermore, the genre fashioned a way to (re)interpret Panamanian national identity from the perspective of the urban poor. Similar to other Latin American hip hop artists, Panamanian reggae in Spanish artists challenge local, national, and international notions of identity, territory, and a sense of national belonging. This investigation seeks to examine the lyrics of Panamanian *reggaesero*, Renato, one of the first reggae in Spanish artists in Panama to gain national and international fame in the mid-1980s. Specifically, it interrogates the following: How do Renato’s lyrics aid in the (re)interpretation of Panamanian

national identity? What role does race/racism play in his lyrics? Lastly, do his lyrics manifest a consolidation or reinterpretation of (Afro)Panamanian identity?

Black Identity in Panama

Black identity in Panama is one of the most complex socio-political issues in both Latin America and the Hispanic Caribbean. Black populations in Panama fall into two groups. The first group includes Spanish-speaking blacks (Afro-Hispanics) who are direct descendants of enslaved Africans. The second group includes English-speaking West Indians who migrated from the British Caribbean (Jamaica and Barbados) to work on the Panama Railroad (1850-1855) and the Canal (1904-1914). Spanish-speaking Afro-Hispanics have “assimilated,” while English-speaking West Indians have not. In fact, West Indians continue to assert their black consciousness over a Hispanic Panamanian nationality. Over the years, this conflict has strained race relations between “black” West Indians and “Spanish” Afro-Hispanics. Black West Indians vehemently challenge the racial (Hispanic), linguistic (Spanish), and religious (Catholic) components of Panamanian nation-building rhetoric that are rooted in nineteenth-century Latin American discourses that promoted similarity over difference. In Panama, nineteenth-century *mestizaje* (race-mixing) discourse encouraged cultural uniformity and in turn fashioned a national anti-black sentiment.

Like other Latin American countries, Panama defined itself based on centuries of *mestizaje*. Racial identification has always been a contentious enterprise in Latin America and Panama is no exception. During the Panamanian nation-building project, racial particularities were de-emphasized and the intellectual discourse of *mestizaje* called for a unified nation based on a “common” group of peoples. As de Castro notes: “[In Latin America] ...the discourse of *mestizaje*, thus became a way for the three numerically dominant races living in the Americas—white, Amerindian, and black—to become incorporated into the same national project” (19). Unlike in the United States where the “one drop rule”⁵ applies to anyone of African descent, the classification of Latin Americans varies according to class, color, and complexion. *Mestizaje* made racial constructions in Latin America less determinate, which created more ambiguity (Wade 29). Furthermore, racial status in Latin America “depends more

on social class than on color or other racial traits” (Davis 99). However, this does not mean that racism is non-existent given that the darkest Latin Americans typically comprise the lowest socioeconomic group (Davis 103).

Mestizaje discourse in Panama incorporated the black masses but sought to render invisible the darker peoples of the nation. After Panama’s independence in 1821, the term *negro* “became politically charged ... because of its identification with slavery” (McGuinness 22). Instead, the oligarchy chose to use the phrase *gente de color* (people of color) to describe the black and *mulato* masses that comprised a majority of the population in Panama City and Colón. Thus, despite the large number of African descendants in Panama in 1789,⁶ a time when blacks already comprised a whopping 63 percent of the total population, Panama chose to define itself in non-black terms ignoring the African majority (Rout 273). Through racial mixing, the *gente de color* or *mestizos*⁷ (mixed-race) gradually were to become absorbed into the dominant population. In this way, *mestizaje* encouraged intermarriage between the various ethnic groups which resulted in a larger *mestizo* and a decreasing indigenous and black population. *Mestizaje* discourse buttressed Panamanian nationalism and a national sense of Hispanic identity by pitting an autochthonous Latino identity against a foreign non-Hispanic one. The push for *mestizaje* strengthened a nationalistic rhetoric but mythic reality of a homogeneous Panamanian society devoid of racial conflict and blackness. Guerrón-Montero notes,

Panama presents an interesting case of taking pride as a racial democracy and having a nationalist rhetoric that portrays a particular kind of Latino or mestizo racial identity as normative. Panama contrasts itself with other parts of Latin America having racial inequalities and injustices, which it claims do not exist in Panama because of its long history of miscegenation and harmonious relations. It attributes any inequalities and racism to the U.S. presence in Panama, which introduced segregation and discrimination in the Canal Zone. This portrayal represents a nationalist stance against United States intervention. At the same time, Latinos are viewed as stereotypical or the “real” Panamanian. This results in favoring some groups and fostering racial differentiation. (210)

Clearly, *mestizaje* did not celebrate the diverse ethnic composition of the nation, but encouraged assimilation and acculturation, which would result in the elimination of the darker populations. However, the influx of West Indians would create a problem for the Panamanian oligarchy that desired to create a nation in the image of Europe (Barrow and Priestley 53-54). West Indian immigration coupled with Panama's large African population undermined the official ideology of Panama as a *mestizo* nation. English-speaking workers from Jamaica and Barbados who migrated there in search of economic prosperity quickly transformed the country's ethnic composition. The presence of these black Protestant English-speaking workers not only threatened the *mestizo* Catholic Spanish-speaking nation, but also challenged Panama's traditional image as a country of *hispanidad* (Spanish heritage).

Especially after the Panama Canal was completed in 1914, Panama was perceived as a United States territory devoid of its Hispanic heritage. In response, the country attempted to reaffirm its *hispanidad* by utilizing neocolonial architecture, constructing in 1923 a monument of Cervantes,⁸ and by naming its currency the *balboa*, in honor of the Panamanian conquistador, Vasco Núñez de Balboa (1475-1519) (Szok, *La última* 99). All of this was established with the hope that the outside world would recognize Panama as a unified "Hispanic" nation. Moreover, *hispanidad* became a major tenet of Panamanian nationalism of the period, which again aimed to "whiten" Panamanian culture (Szok, *La última* 94). Panamanian *criollos*⁹ appropriated the discourse of *mestizaje* to reinforce *hispanidad* and the nation's racial, cultural, and linguistic homogeneity against United States imperialism. In short, to counter demographic changes, many Panamanian intellectuals ignored the African majority while propagating ideals of an independent republic based on *hispanidad* while vehemently rejecting North American and West Indian influences.

It is not surprising, therefore, that West Indian discrimination heightened during this stage of the nation-building period and the subsequent anti-imperialism crusade since "[n]ational or racial difference ... reinforced discrimination" (Appelbaum et al. 2). Because they were involved in the process of *mestizaje*, Afro-Hispanics were viewed by the nation as more willing to assimilate; accordingly, they were not considered a major threat to the nation-building project. In fact, even some Afro-Hispanic writers perpetuated racism against other

West Indians by noting linguistic differences between themselves and arguing that the latter were allies of the United States. Noted Panamanian *modernista* poet, Gaspar Octavio Hernández (1893-1918), was one Afro-Hispanic writer who reinforced stereotypes of the West Indian population by echoing a national rhetoric of hatred against the immigrant-turned-citizen population. Hernández argued that West Indians “...se pirran por norteamericanizarse y, en su afán de adular al pueblo de Roosevelt, prescinden descaradamente de su lengua madre y se ufanan de expresarse a menudo en incomprensible y tosco *patois* anglo-yankee” (...long to North Americanize themselves, and in their desire to praise Roosevelt’s nation, they disregard their mother tongue, and boast of expressing themselves in an incomprehensible and rough Anglo-Yankee *patois*;¹⁰ 112). Hernández was an integrationist who obviously internalized the *mestizaje* rhetoric, believing that black West Indians should renounce their native cultural and linguistic affiliations for those of their new homeland. In other words, they were to speak Spanish, convert to Catholicism, and intermarry. For Hernández, West Indian signified foreigner, as the group was identified with North American imperialism due to linguistic affiliations and their economic ties to the construction of the Panama Canal.

Panamanian writers demonized the West Indian population in hopes of impeding North American imperialism and to encourage the new immigrants to repatriate to their native homelands. *El peligro antillano en la América Central* (West Indian Danger in Central America 1924), for example, also articulated anti-West Indian sentiment and the perceived differences between Afro-Hispanics and West Indians in Panama. Panamanian critic, Alfaro, writes:

Es evidente que hay gran diferencia entre el negro antillano y el hombre de color desarrollado dentro de la civilización Indo-Americana, no solamente por su estatus en las vecinas colonias inglesas allí donde su situación económica es deprimente y sus salarios ridículos, sino también por el ambiente de respeto de que en nuestras sociedades disfrutaban las razas de color, consideraciones que les han sido acordadas por la nobleza de su carácter y su asimilación a nuestras más altas virtudes morales. (7)

(It is evident that there is a large difference between the black West Indian and the man of color raised in the Indo-American civilization, not only because of his status in the neighboring English colonies where his economic situation is depressing and his wages

unfair, but also because of the respectable environment that our colored races enjoy, considerations that have been accorded because of their noble character and assimilation to our most moral virtues.)

These comments reflect nationalistic opposition to black West Indians. The message is clear: unlike Afro-Hispanics, West Indians were culturally and linguistically different from other Panamanians and did not reflect *hispanidad*. Anti-West Indianism contributed to several laws directed against those who did not abide with Panamanian nationality. In 1926, law 13 prohibited non Spanish-speaking blacks from entering the country. In 1941, President Arnulfo Arias made it a requirement to speak Spanish to become a citizen. Ultimately, West Indians were encouraged to give up their own culture and adopt that of Panama or leave (Conniff 4). As a result, many West Indians decided to repatriate to their native homelands. *Reggae en español* artists such as Renato are a product of anti-West Indian sentiment, the Canal, and Panamanian national identity politics.

Reggae en español or Reggaetón?

As the epigraph by Twickel that precedes this study acknowledges, any discussion of *reggaetón* commences with the Panamanian Isthmus. The international phenomenon known as *reggaetón* has been linked to Panamanian reggae in Spanish, which conveys the confusion and complexity surrounding the origins of both genres. The pioneering anthology, *Reggaeton* (2009), teased out this confusion by mapping *reggaetón* and discussing the genre's connection to Panama. For many, *reggaetón* commenced in Panama, developed in Puerto Rico, and commercialized in the United States, while others insist that the genre has its roots in 1990s' Puerto Rican *underground*¹¹ music (Marshall et al. 10-11). Debates surrounding the origins of *reggaetón* have pitted Panamanian reggae in Spanish artists such as Renato against DJ Nelson and DJ Goldy, Puerto Rican *reggaeseros* who feel that the island has claims to the genre. From their vantage point, *reggaetón* came "straight outta Puerto Rico" and there is no arguing otherwise (Szok, "Renato" 1). Proprietorship of *reggaetón's* origins has as much to do with bragging rights as to subtle stylistic differences between the two genres. While *reggae en español* is characterized by dancehall and Jamaican reggae, *reggaetón* is infused with hip hop,

rap, and above all, the renowned *dembow riddim* or percussion/drum pattern. For some, the distinctions are clear, yet for others the differentiations remain murky precisely because the two are interconnected, intertwined, and in some instances interchangeable. Renato attempts to differentiate the genres. He notes:

I think that [the basic difference] it's the way we sing it. It's not the music. The music is almost the same. Look, you hear Panamanian reggae, and you say that it seems like the same thing. You got some artists that sound the same. But if you hear the music and the way we sing, then you'll understand that it's different from the Puerto Ricans. It's a little more *suave*, and you understand the Spanish more. Puerto Ricans like to invent a lot of words that most people don't understand. In Panama, we have a different type of reggae. We have the most romantic reggae, because we are a romantic country. We don't have so much gangster music. I can tell you how many gangster rappers we have. It's like six or seven. But we have so many romantic singers, almost six or seven hundred singers who don't sing about gangster stuff. (Szok, "Renato" 9-10)

This is a common distinction made between the two genres: one is romantic while the other is more gangsta. It is beyond the present study to map the origins of *reggaetón* but instead to discuss the development of Panamanian reggae in Spanish; *reggaetón's* trajectory is linked to the Isthmus of Panama and follows a lineage initiated by the pioneers of *reggae en español*. For example, *reggaesera* Ivy Queen and rapper Vico C, both from Puerto Rico, frequently visited Panama during the 90s, the height of Panamanian reggae in Spanish, and brought those very same rhythms and beats back to the island (Nwankwo 90). Without a doubt, the line between *reggaetón* and *reggae en español* has always been fluid, blurring distinctions between the two genres. As various artists from the 2004 documentary, *Chosen Few: El Documental*, noted, "Reggaetón ... es el nombre internacional de reggae en español" (*Reggaetón* ... is the international name of reggae in Spanish) or more simply put, "Reggaetón es reggae en español" (*Reggaetón* is reggae in Spanish). By contrast, Panamanian artists view *reggae en español* as a distinct genre that gave rise to the international phenomenon of *reggaetón*. For them, *reggae en español's* identity is rooted in the West Indian communities of the Canal Zone, Colón, and Panama City.

As Nwankwo notes, “Panama was actually the first Latin American country to produce and popularize Jamaican reggae rhythms with Spanish lyrics...” (90). *Reggae en español*’s hybrid nature speaks to the nation’s Caribbean heritage and the well-known cultural and political influence of West Indian immigrants and their descendants. Artists such as El General, Renato, Nando Boom, El Maleante, and Chicho Man took Jamaican dancehall songs and beats and infused them with Spanish lyrics during the late seventies and early eighties. This style came to be known in Panama as *reggae en español*, literally reggae music with Spanish lyrics. West Indian El General¹² along with his contemporary, Renato, paved the way for *reggae en español* by playing for private parties.

Leonardo “Renato” Aulder’s personal story as a young Jamaican and Barbadian descendant growing up in the Canal Zone as “American” contrasts with his shocking discovery that he was indeed Panamanian after his family relocated to Río Abajo in 1978, a seminal year in Panamanian history. 1978 was one year after President Carter signed the Torrijos-Carter Treaty (1977), which would transfer ownership and operation of the Canal from the U.S. to Panama in 1999. This treaty affected the lives of not only U.S. citizens, but also West Indians who resided in the Zone, a geographic area located between Colón and Panama City that represented neocolonialism and empire building. Thousands of Zonians were forced to relocate from the Zone to foreign Panama City. Many opted to migrate to the United States and became part of the burgeoning Afro-Panamanian enclave of Brooklyn, New York.¹³ This cultural and ideological transformation from North American to Panamanian reflects the transatlantic and trans-Caribbean experience that complicates yet enriches Panamanian identity. Renato’s comfortable “American” childhood growing up in the Zone watching U.S. football and Major League Baseball contrasted with his experiences as a teenager in Río Abajo. In Río Abajo, his family relocated to 13th Street, a neighborhood Renato describes as a “ghetto” (Szok, “Renato” 7). These differences would plague his consciousness as both a teenager and future *reggaesero*. He ironically had to teach himself Spanish in order to sing *reggae en español* after he formed the pioneering group, Renato y las 4 Estrellas (Renato and the 4 Stars).

Renato’s Pioneering Reggae in Spanish Lyrics

Renato launched his professional career in 1984 with “El D.E.N.I.,” a song in which the *reggaesero* assumes the persona of the Departamento Nacional de Investigaciones (The National Department of Investigations) that “operated as a domestic security agency in Panama” (Szok, “Renato” 4). The socially conscious Renato points to corruption inherent in the justice system and utilizes “El D.E.N.I.” as a metaphor for national corruption and intolerance. Similar to the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) in the U.S., the D.E.N.I. has historically been viewed by Panamanians as a kind of secret police. The D.E.N.I. was a unit under the Fuerzas de Policía (Police Forces) and functioned as the nation’s FBI but was dismantled after the U.S. overthrew the military dictatorship of Manuel Noriega who ruled Panama from 1983-1989. The D.E.N.I. investigated crime in Panama and surveyed all illegal activity. Accordingly, the secret activities of the organization led many Panamanians to question and fear its covert operations. As Renato noted in an interview, “‘The D.E.N.I.’ was at that time like the police, but they were more rude than the police. They were like the CIA here, so I said in the song what D.E.N.I. could do, what they can do, like saying what the policeman can do” (Nwankwo 93).

In the track, Renato promptly announces, “Yo soy Renato, comisario con poder / Te voy a enseñar lo que el D.E.N.I. puede hacer” (I’m Renato, the [police] commissioner with power / I am going to teach you what the D.E.N.I. can do), and inserts himself into the national and political sphere (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ps1oPuXGslg>). The refrain that repeats itself throughout the song rhetorically asks, “¿Qué es lo que el D.E.N.I. puede hacer?” (What is it that the D.E.N.I. can do?), and prepares the listener for the acts that the D.E.N.I. commits. Renato enumerates the injustices that the D.E.N.I. enacts upon ordinary Panamanian citizens. He announces, “Yo puedo llegar en mi LTD / Gritarte en español, también en inglés / Empujarte duro contra la pared / Y a punta de palo tú vas a aprender” (I can arrive in my Ford LTD / Yell at you in Spanish, also in English / Push you hard against the wall / And by force you are going to learn). He continues, “Yo puedo ponerte las esposas / Pegarte con un tubo o [sic] otra cosa.../ Con mi cara albina, te puedo golpear/ Porque eres un tremendo criminal / Por pegar a una mujer / Te voy a enseñar / Que a la justicia no se puede burlar” (I can handcuff you / Hit you with a pipe or something else... / With my albino face, I can hit you / Because you are a tremendous criminal / For hitting a woman / I am going to teach you / That you cannot make

fun of the justice system). Clearly, the D.E.N.I.'s power is endless and the ordinary Panamanian citizen never knows when the D.E.N.I. is going to strike or appear. Finally, he suggests that the D.E.N.I. enacts physical abuse against anyone who challenges its authority: "Por ser atrevido, malo y feo / Te golpearé hasta que te echas un peo / Y por ser tan malo tú vas a ver / Que yo soy Renato comisario con poder" (For being bold, bad and ugly / I will hit you until you fart / And for behaving so badly you are going to see / That I am Renato the [police] commissioner with power). The D.E.N.I., which was supposed to protect Panamanians against criminal activity, ironically enacts injustices with force and power against Panamanians without rhyme or reason. Clearly, the song was "considered to be an important expression of dissent against Panama's then military government" (Szok, "Renato" 4). The verse, "Con mi cara albina te puedo golpear" (With my albino face, I can hit you), evokes the poet speaker's antipathy towards the "white" police force that subjugate brown and blacks to unjust treatment. Clearly, Renato lashes out at corrupt law enforcement officials who abuse darker Panamanians. In this respect, the song echoes those of United States gangsta rappers N.W.A.¹⁴ who chastised the police for hate crimes towards the urban black community in their 1988 groundbreaking album *Straight Outta Compton*.

It was Renato's signature song "La chica de los ojos café" (The Brown-Eyed Girl) that garnered him national and international success and instant fame in 1985. "La chica" originated as a parody of a famous Venezuelan *telenovela* of the era named "Esa muchacha de ojos café"¹⁵ (That Brown-Eyed Girl) and gained popularity throughout Latin America (Nwankwo 94). Renato inserts himself into a popular national genre from which people of color have been excluded throughout the Americas: *la telenovela* (soap opera) (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iNx1NTxl6tU>).

Coro: Es la chica de los ojos café / Y es mi chica de los ojos café (2x) / Mami tú eres muy hermosa / No te cambio por la *Dama de Rosa*¹⁶ / Mamasita tú eres original / Te ves mejor que la famosa *Cristal*¹⁷ ... / Mami te lo juro. Te compraré un carro / Para llevarte para *Monte Calvario*¹⁸ / Pero nunca te pegaré... / Seremos todos para uno y uno para todos / Porque el sol algún día sale para todos / Mami te juro que nuestro destino / Será construir un mundo latino..."

(Chorus: She is the brown-eyed girl / And she is my brown-eyed girl (2x) / *Mami* you're beautiful / I wouldn't change you for the *Lady in Rose* / *Mamasita* you are original / You look better than the famous *Cristal* / *Mami* I swear. I'll buy you a car / to take you to *Monte Calvario* / But I'll never hit you... / And we'll be all for one and one for all / Because the sun someday shines for everyone / *Mami* I swear that our destiny / Will be to build a Latin world.)

The popular refrain that runs throughout the song, “Es la chica de los ojos café / Y es mi chica de los ojos café” (She is the brown-eyed girl / And she is my brown-eyed girl), conveys that the female persona belongs to the *reggaesero* and has been re-appropriated and reconfigured to satisfy the poet speaker's desires. By doing so, Renato subverts and refashions this popular genre and incorporates a marginal population and discourse into mainstream Panamanian and South American culture. The music video presents images of black Panamanian women juxtaposed with images of the soap opera, *Esa muchacha de los ojos café*, which is primarily populated with “white” Venezuelans. The brown eyes are not those presented in the Eurocentric Venezuelan *telenovela*, but ones that represent brown and black Panama, a population denigrated and ignored. In addition, the music video portrays the black Panamanian woman as the ideal. Thus, the song in conjunction with the video, inverts the paradigm of black as inferior and white as superior. Specifically, it destabilizes the longstanding metaphor of the white woman as the idealized subject, a literary trope traced to European literature.¹⁹

Furthermore, the poetic voice construes meanings of nation building and a more egalitarian *mestizaje* when he invites the girl to “construir un mundo latino” (build a Latin world). At first glance, the verse reminds the initiated listener of early twentieth-century *negrista*²⁰ poems that presented the *mulata* as the harmonious fusion of Latin American race relations. Luis Palés Matos' poem “Mulata Antilla” is one such example that characterizes the *mulata* as a cultural amalgam that embodies a perceived Latin American unity and racial equality. However, it is apparent by the end of the song that the poet speaker is subverting this long-standing Latin American metaphor of racial equality. By doing so, he simultaneously disrupts the established order and status quo. The song's burlesque intention is evident at the

end when the poet speaker encourages the listener to “Levanta la mano si tú ves telenovelas” (Raise your hand if you watch soap operas) and invites the listener to participate in the parody.

While “La chica” expands notions of Latin American race-mixing, Renato’s bilingual song “América” (1987) reinterprets the United States’ insular vision of the Americas. Sung utilizing the same beat and rhythm of the popular U.S. patriotic song, “America, the Beautiful,” Renato inserts Central and South America into the geopolitical concept of America (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pEX7wjmTldI>).

America is number one
 América es número uno
 Oh-Oh America, America
 Say God shed His grace on thee
 And crown thy good with brotherhood from sea to shining sea...
 Oye señores, esto es para ti...
 Yo soy centroamericano, oye mi amigo,
 El saludo para todos los latinos
 Los suramericanos no se quedan atrás
 Y hasta Chile yo voy a viajar²¹...
 Sisters and brothers let’s get together
 Love and peace we want it forever
 New York City, California, Washington D.C.
 This is Renato y esto es para ti.

Renato’s inclusion of Spanish-speaking countries reinforces America’s geographic, cultural, and linguistic plurality. He rewrites “American” history by including all of the Americas. “América” is both transnational²² and transcultural encompassing various geographic areas and a manifold of cultures that transcend the Panamanian Isthmus. Renato reinterprets the Anglo-Saxon vision of America and illustrates Panamanian, Central American, and South American unity. The video displays Latin American adults and youth of various racial and ethnic hues and provides a visual image to the cultural hybridity that the song foregrounds. Renato also “speaks” to his black brethren in the United States by utilizing the black vernacular “Sisters and brothers let’s get

together” when referencing African Americans in New York City, Washington D.C. and California, cities and states densely populated with African Americans.

However, Renato breaks with images commonly associated with United States gangsta rappers²³ noting in the following lyric, “And this is Renato and I don’t use no gun,” conveying the harmonious nature of his music. Furthermore, Renato’s identification as Central American is not without notice. Born in 1961, his ease of identification as a black British descendant, which he conveys in interviews, does not hinder his Central American consciousness. By contrast, Panamanian Caribbean writers such as Carlos “Cubena” Guillermo Wilson and Carlos Russell identify as black British Caribbean subjects in a racially tense Spanish-speaking world. Several generations removed from this literary group,²⁴ Renato does not express the same identity conflicts. He identifies easily with both heritages (Panamanian and West Indian), and does not view them in opposition.

Conclusion

Renato reinterprets Panamanian and Latin American identity through the portrayal of a multilingual and multicultural diasporic population. He envisions Panama, Central, and Latin America as territories marked by diversity, hybridity, and difference in the words of black British cultural critic Stuart Hall. Renato defies a monolithic, uniform Panamanian national identity through songs that challenge Panamanian nation-building, *hispanidad*, and *mestizaje* discourse while reconfiguring Panamanian national identity from a black nationalist perspective. However, Renato’s reinterpretation of Panama does not marginalize other non-black populations but embraces the diversity inherent in Panama and Latin America. Instead, his songs resist longstanding local, national, and international notions of identity, territory, and a sense of belonging.

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Discography

Renato. "El D.E.N.I." 1984. CD.

---. "América." *Soy el más sensual-Renato Classics*. SEI Records, 2007. CD.

---. "La chica de los ojos café." *Soy el más sensual-Renato Classics*. SEI Records, 2007. CD.

Notes

¹ Dennis' *Afro-Colombian Hip-Hop: Globalization, Transcultural Music, and Ethnic Identities* (2011) demonstrates how Afro-Colombian artists utilize hip hop to reimagine the Colombian nation. In "Dialogically Redefining the Nation: Hip-Hop and the Collective Identity," Feracho examines how black artists in Brazil and Cuba appropriate hip hop to redefine ideals of national inclusiveness. Fernandes' "Fear of a Black Nation: Local Rappers, Transnational Crossings, and State Power in Contemporary Cuba" shows how Afro-Cuban youth employ hip hop music to signal issues of racial discrimination and black marginality.

² "Pum Pum" is a Jamaican term for the female sexual organ.

³ "Caramelo" means (caramel) candy but El General utilizes it colloquially to symbolize the male sexual organ.

⁴ The Cold Crush Brothers (Grandmaster Caz, DJ Tony Tone, DJ Charlie Chase) comprised one of the most popular hip hop groups that originated out of the Bronx in the 1970s and recorded singles such as "Weekend" (1982), "Punk Rock Rap" (1983), "Heartbreakers" (1984), and "Fresh, Wild, Fly, and Bold" (1984) (Bynoe 50-51). C & C Music Factory was an American dance, pop, and hip hop sensation formed

in 1989 that garnered such hits as “Gonna Make you Sweat (Everybody Dance Now)” and “Just a Touch of Love” (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/C%2BC_Music_Factory).

⁵ In the United States, if you have “one drop” of black blood then you are considered black. The “one-drop rule” emerged out of the racially segregated Southern United States and heightened during the Jim Crow era (1876-1964). From 1880-1910, several Southern states passed a number of segregation laws that “prohibited racial intermarriage, required separate seating in trains, buses, theaters, libraries, and stores, and required separate schools” and other facilities (Davis 52). By 1915, the “one-drop rule” became firmly entrenched and accepted in United States culture. Thus, the “one-drop rule” was employed to maintain white supremacy and to separate blacks from whites in all realms of society.

⁶ According to Rout, “Of the 35,920 persons in the Province of Panama in 1789, 22,504 (about 63 percent) were either slaves or free Negroids” (273).

⁷ McGuinness notes that in Panama the term, *castas* (castes), was used instead of the popular term *mestizo* (mixed-race) employed in other Spanish-speaking countries (22). However, in this study, the term “mestizo” will be used interchangeably with *castas* to reflect the racial mixing aspect of the *mestizaje* project and to better compare racial discourse in Panama with other Latin American *mestizo* projects.

⁸ Spanish writer, Miguel de Cervantes, is the author of the canonical text, *Don Quixote* (1605, 1615), which is considered to be the first modern novel.

⁹ *Criollos* are European/Spanish-descended Panamanians who were born in Panama.

¹⁰ All translations in this article are my own.

¹¹ *Underground* music in Puerto Rico emerged in the 1980s and encompassed reggae and rap music that projected the environment of an invisible youth culture: drugs, violence, poverty, love and sex. As Rivera notes, “*underground* was indeed often vulgar and violent. Sex, marijuana, and guns figured prominently in many of its lyrics” (111).

¹² Known in music circles as El General, Edgardo Franco joined the group Renato y las 4 Estrellas and eventually launched a solo career. El General’s professional persona is just as fascinating as his renowned Panamanian reggae songs in Spanish that launched his career in the late 1980s. Assuming the persona of Panamanian General Torrijos who died in a mysterious plane crash in 1981, El General dressed in concerts in full military uniform. His presence was so overwhelming that when he performed a concert in Chile, dictator Augusto Pinochet (1974-1990) refused to allow him to dress as El General. In order to sing, he had to perform as Edgardo Franco instead of his well-established alter ego. By assuming the national persona of “el general,” Franco aligned himself with the national political culture and made himself visible.

¹³ A vibrant Panamanian community exists of approximately 30,000 Panamanian West Indians turned U.S. citizens in Brooklyn, NY. After the passing of the 1955 Remón-Eisenhower Treaty, thousands of non-U.S. citizens in the Canal Zone “lost their jobs, housing, and commissary-buying privileges, and were compelled to pay income taxes to the government of Panama” (Priestley 53). During this period, Panamanian West Indians suffered job loss in the private sector. The lack of economic advancement and the changing racial and political dynamics of the Canal Zone led numerous West Indians to migrate to the United States to the Brooklyn Diaspora. Many of these immigrants (approximately 8,168) migrated to the U.S. during the sixties for education and economic advancement but maintained cultural ties with the nation-state (Priestley 55). As Priestley notes, the West Indians who migrated to Brooklyn began to form a hybrid cultural and racial identity linking them racially with African Americans and culturally with other Latinos and West Indians; yet, they strove to preserve a Panamanian national identity (53).

¹⁴ N.W.A. is one of the pioneering west coast gangsta rap groups formed in the 1980s in the United States. The acronym stands for “N... with Attitude.” The rap group was renowned for its racial epithets and indictment of the police for committing crimes and injustices against urban black youth in California.

Songs such as “F... the Police” from their album, *Straight Outta Compton*, drew attention to police brutality, racial profiling, and cases involving bad cops (Price 175).

¹⁵ For more information on the *telenovela*, see “Telenovelas ‘Esa muchacha de los ojos café’” (<http://www.network54.com/Forum/674948/message/1304564425>).

¹⁶ *La Dama de Rosa* was a 1986 Venezuelan soap opera. For more information see, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/La_Dama_de_Rosa.

¹⁷ *Cristal* (1985-86) was a famous Venezuelan soap opera that treated the abandonment of a young girl (Cristal) and her reunion with her now successful mother Victoria. For more information see, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cristal_\(telenovela\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cristal_(telenovela)).

¹⁸ *Monte Calvario* was a 1986 Mexican soap opera that related the abuses suffered by a woman at the hands of her alcoholic husband. For more information see, http://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Monte_Calvario_%28telenovela%29.

¹⁹ In “Cultural Strangulation: Black Literature and the White Aesthetic,” Gayle notes that “[t]he distinction between whiteness as beautiful (good) and blackness as ugly (evil) appears early in the literature of the middle ages—in the Morality Plays of England” (34). In “Black Phobia and the White Aesthetic in Spanish American Literature,” Jackson notes how Spanish authors such as Lope de Rueda utilized this same dichotomy in their works (*Eufemia* 1576); this influenced the writings of Spanish American authors such as Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda (*Sab* 1841) and Cirilo Villaverde (*Cecilia Valdés* 1882) who portrayed their black protagonists with white features (467).

²⁰ The *negrista* (poetic negrism) movement flourished during the 1920s and 1930s in the Hispanic Caribbean and was a pseudo-black poetry that focused on physical elements of the black, his sexual prowess, and propensity toward music (Cartey 67). *Negrista* poets such as Luis Palés Matos (1898-1957), Emilio Ballagas (1910-1954), and Manuel del Cabral (1907-1999) appropriated poetic devices such as onomatopoeia, repetition, rhythm, and rhyme to portray African culture. Although this poetry was concerned with the black image, it was primarily a movement of white intellectuals who objectified the black literary subject. As a result, the movement has often been viewed as the “exploitation of black culture by white writers” (Cartey 41). These writers portrayed blacks and African culture as sensual, exotic, and sexual without any psychological profundity. The black literary image that materialized during this period was often superficial and rarely focused on the socio-historical and socio-economic factors that plagued black America such as poverty, discrimination, and racism.

²¹ “Oye ... yo voy a viajar” (Listen ladies and gentlemen, this is for you. I am Central American, listen my friend, this is for all the *latinos*, the South Americans don’t remain behind and I am even going to visit Chile).

²² Transnationalism signals “the fluidity with which ideas, objects, capital, and people ... move across borders and boundaries” (Basch et al. 27). As Stephens suggests, “Transnational studies offers a framework for identifying processes, identities, structures and cultures that criss-cross with those of the nation-building project” (593).

²³ Gangsta rap arose in the late 80s and early 90s in the United States. The previously mentioned rap group N.W.A. epitomized gangsta rap music in style, dress, lyrics, and violence.

²⁴ Born between 1934 and 1945, Anglophone Caribbean authors represent the first generation of writers in Panama to discuss the “duality” of being both Panamanian and Caribbean. The term generation refers to those writers of Caribbean ancestry in Panama born between 1934 and 1945. Therefore, it refers to the literary generation and not the years that the writer’s ancestors have resided on the isthmus. Members of this literary generation include Gerardo Maloney (1945), Carlos Russell (1934), Carlos Wilson (1941), and Melva Lowe de Goodin (1945). I analyze select members of this generation in “‘Are Panamanians of Caribbean Ancestry an Endangered Species’?: Critical Literary Debates on Panamanian Blackness in the Works of Carlos Wilson, Gerardo Maloney, and Carlos Russell.”